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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study that examined the attitudes of California school district superintendents toward school restructuring are presented in this paper. Interviews were conducted with a total of 30 superintendents and senior staff members in 22 California school districts to explore their orientations toward school restructuring in general and toward eight specific restructuring approaches--school-based management, teacher empowerment, teacher professionalization, labor relations restructuring, pedagogical restructuring, governance reform, school choice, and integrated child service delivery. Although the superintendents held widely divergent perceptions about the nature and potential value of various approaches, three key tensions shaped their overall pattern of thinking about restructuring: (1) saliency vs. explicitness of the issue; (2) performance improvement vs. legitimacy of the schools; and (3) accountability vs. ownership. Two contextual factors also influenced their thinking--amount of superintendency experience and the kind of community support. Implications are that school restructuring is not a clearly focused program of reform; caution should be used in judging reform efforts; and most efforts are relatively remote from the "technical core" of teaching and learning. A conclusion is that the politics of evaluation are important to the longterm success of restructuring. (23 references) (LMI)

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School Restructuring: The Superintendent's View

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March, 1991

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School Restructuring: The Superintendent's View[1]

Restructuring of school organizations and services is a prominent theme in an educational reform and improvement effort that now engulfs most of the industrial world. A post-World War II consensus on the character and value of planned public services has all but disappeared. As a result schools, together with most other government-run public services are being challenged to prove that their productivity justifies the enormous public investment in their development and operations. A shifting international market for private sector goods and services is producing apparently successful restructuring in a number of multi-national corporations. Similar restructuring of service provision and service delivery is being urged on the schools by corporate executives and political leaders. Within the schools themselves, and among their higher education advocates and critics, restructuring has become a major focus of debate and analysis.

Vague Definitions and Multiple Meanings

While the term restructuring is among the most visible and provocative concepts in the school improvement debate, its meaning remains remarkably diffuse. In a recent summary, historian David Tyack concludes that,

> People regard restructuring as a synonym for the market mechanism of choice, or teacher professionalism and empowerment, or decentralization and school site management, or involving parents more in their children's education, or national standards in curriculum with tests to match, or deregulation, or new forms of accountability, or basic changes in curriculum and instruction, or some or all of these in combination. (Tyack, 1990, pp. 170-171).

One important source of confusion in the meaning of the term restructuring is the dual functions played by the concept. In its most prominent usage, restructuring is a political concept. It is used to mobilize and focus reform energies. In this role, the term tends to follow the principles of political symbolism early described by Edleman (1977). When used for political leadership, terms have to be interpreted broadly and remain sufficiently vague to be endorsed by a coalition of supporters whose underlying disagreements would keep them from supporting more clearly defined programs of action. In contrast with its political role as a leadership tool, restructuring also serves as an important professional concept. Among professional educators, the term is used to identify and highlight particular approaches to improved school performance. In

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[1]The research reported here was supported by the California Educational Research Cooperative (CERC), School of Education, University of California, Riverside. The findings and conclusions presented are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of CERC or its sponsoring school systems. A draft of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 3-7, 1991.

this context, confusion over the meaning of the term is dysfunctional. Loose definition is important for the mobilization of political support, but it makes identification and implementation of specific program and policy changes exceedingly difficult.

With the concept of school restructuring at the top of the school reform agenda, it is time to clarify its alternative political and professional meanings so that clearer policy directions can be set and specific reform approaches isolated, explicitly implemented and carefully evaluated. Like social researchers, school policy makers cannot determine whether grand ideas are appropriate and useful if alternative operational manifestations are not carefully distinguished. The research community can best support policy and practice in this area by determining exactly what school system changes are being stimulated by restructuring enthusiasts, and then determining what effects these changes are having on the fiscal, organizational and educational performance of the schools.

Three approaches to clarification of meaning are possible. We could build a rigorous theory of school operation and productivity -- a theory which would illuminate all possible meanings of restructuring by specifying which aspects of the schools can be manipulated in an effort to improve performance. While substantial work is being undertaken on identification of parameters influencing school production (for a summary see, Wahlberg, 1990), there are two problems with this approach. First, it is not clear that research work to date has identified all, or even the most important, factors influencing the productive process in education. To the extent that important factors remain to be identified and evaluated, important aspects of school restructuring will be overlooked. Moreover, since early research is likely to produce misleading or erroneous findings, restructuring efforts are in danger of being misdirected. The second problem with this approach lies in the divergent theories of education and social system operations being used to formulate production theories. For example, recent emphases on marketplace and social exchange theories that draw attention to issues of incentive distribution and choice making are not compatible with analyses based on cultural or symbolic interactionist theories. As a result, there is no easy way to integrate these largely unrelated approaches to analysis. Restructuring proposals derived from one theoretical tradition can be quite at odds with those based on a competing theory of social behavior.

A second possible approach to the delineation of alternative meanings and proposals for school restructuring is to review the professional and scholarly literature on the topic and try to identify common themes, assumptions and points of reference that would enable direct comparisons among competing reform strategies. As described below, we have undertaken some work along these lines. Since restructuring is primarily discussed as a reform and improvement approach that needs to be implemented, rather than one that has been in place long enough to evaluate on the basis of evidence collected in schools and classrooms, however, this approach is more suggestive than definitive in clarifying promising alternatives.

The third approach--the one directing the research reported here--is to ask policy makers and school professionals who are engaged in the restructuring process what meanings they attach to the label and how they form an overall reform strategy within the divergent and fragmentary pressures they experience. This strategy involves the simple assumption that the term restructuring should take its analytic meaning directly from the meanings it has for the political and educational leaders who are wrestling with assessing and implementing it in the schools. This approach suggests giving up an emphasis on consistency of meaning and asking instead how the common sense meanings used in everyday thought and discussion are shaping the strategic commitments of key educators and policy makers.

Six Threads of Content

An overview of recent professional and scholarly publications on the subject suggests that the plethora of meanings identified by Tyack (1990) can be helpfully organized under about six overarching themes. To dramatically oversimplify a complex, and often confusing, body of literature, three of these themes have to do with pivotal agencies or targets for restructuring, the other three emphasize key operational elements to be reorganized. The most frequently targeted agencies of restructuring are the (1) school site, (2) the teachers and (3) the school governance system. The three most prominent operational mechanisms are (4) parental or student choice, (5) changing the school's pedagogical strategies, and (6) redefining the mix of services to be provided.

In actual practice, of course, these alternative conceptions of restructuring are not mutually exclusive. Elements from all six threads can be incorporated into any concrete proposal. They are, however, helpfully separated for analysis and evaluation. Moreover, as the data presented in subsequent sections of this paper make clear, educators are able to distinguish among these threads and evaluate independently the value and probable success of each.

Briefly, then, the literature on school restructuring suggests the following array of meanings.

1. School Based Management/Participatory Decisions

The first, and most widely heralded conception of school restructuring focuses on the devolution of power and authority to the school site level. Most often this means strengthening the hand of the school principal in determining a broadened range of policy, program, staffing and budgetary decisions. The rationale for this decentralization of authority and encouragement of school based management varies. Flexibility is the most often cited motive, but there is growing concern about the ultimate impact of this management flexibility on day-to-day operations. A typical view is expressed by Brown (1990), "School based management may be a viable avenue for school improvement because of the flexibility it accords schools, but it does not

appear to be a key stimulus for innovation" (see also, Brickley & Westerberg, 1990; Aronstein, Marlow & Desilets, 1990; Strauber, Stanley & Wagenknecht, 1990).

School site management is generally aimed at altering principal roles, but for a number of analysts the motive for expanding school-based decision making authority is linked to expanding teacher rather than principal influence over school operations (Brandt, 1990; Conley, 1990; Conley & Bachrach, 1990). This second emphasis links the school-site target with the teacher target which we separate for review below.

2. Transforming Teacher Work Roles

A second target of restructuring widely addressed in the literature is the classroom teacher. The primary aims in restructuring teacher work include: expanding power, transforming attitudes and increasing skills. In pursuit of these goals, three distinctive sub-threads can be identified in the restructuring literature addressed to teaching work: empowerment, professionalization and transformation of labor relations.

Empowerment. Teacher empowerment is a theme in the rhetoric of a growing body of advocates for expanded teacher influence over school programs and operations (Duke & Gansneder, 1990; Foster, 1990). Among the most notable advocates of teacher empowerment is the American Federation of Teachers president, Albert Shanker (Shanker, 1990) who urges,

> We must offer teachers a challenge and the opportunity to exercise creativity and judgment, the chance to control their working lives, the stimulation of frequent exchanges with their peers, and a sense of being part of a vital intellectual community.

Professionalism. Teacher professionalization is often confused with the empowerment theme. There is, however, a substantial body of literature with relatively little emphasis on teacher power. This literature is devoted to restructuring the recruitment, training, selection, induction, career development and ongoing skill enhancement of teachers. Highly visible examples of this approach to restructuring include such activities as the National Standards Board's strategies for assessment and certification, the career-ladder reforms of Utah and Tennessee, and the California mentor teacher and new teacher support programs. They also include the proposals of the Holmes Group for restructuring of teacher education, and a wide variety of testing, staff development and evaluation strategies.

Professionalization of the teaching workforce is generally expected to arise through in-service training and assessment or through a "re-population" of the workforce through new teacher preparation programs and testing programs aimed at eliminating inadequate or unmotivated members of the current workforce.

Quite often, professionalization is seen as either a pre-requisite for significant teacher empowerment or as strategy to be linked with empowerment to put education into the hands of staff members committed to high quality instruction and student mentoring. Sykes (1990) stresses that professionalism in teaching must have a distinct meaning, one which complements bureaucratic accountability with responsibility, promotes the professional socialization processes within schools, strengthens connections between teachers and curriculum development, has status equalizing access to external knowledge sources, creates informal leadership opportunities for teachers, legitimates and supports the engagement of teachers in responsibilities beyond direct instruction, and increases communication between policy makers and teachers.

Transforming Labor Relations. A third teaching work force strategy is the restructuring of collective bargaining and labor relations (Bachrach, Shedd & Conley, 1989; Johnson, 1990). California state superintendent of public instruction, Bill Honig, attracted statewide attention in some recent speeches in which he suggested sweeping overhaul of the adversarial, conflict-generating system of labor relations created by the 1975 Rodda act authorizing formal collective bargaining in this state. While his proposals did not get widespread support, there are some isolated examples of substantially restructured labor relations systems across the country.

3. Governance Reform

The third distinctive target of restructuring is the school governance system. Governance reform differs from site-based management and teacher work role change by emphasizing role of community and political leaders rather than professional educators. Governance reform proposals are often combined with restructuring professional work roles, most often with site-based management reforms. Perhaps the most widely recognized example of governance restructuring is the Chicago plan which has created a parent dominated council at each school site. These councils have authority to hire the principal, and have acquired other powers traditionally assigned to district-level boards of education.

In the United Kingdom, the governance reform has moved beyond the site-council strategy. In that country, local schools are being encouraged to "opt out" of the local education authority entirely and become "grant maintained schools" supported entirely by the national government. In California, some observers believe that the School Site Councils created to advise local boards on implementation of school improvement programs represent substantial governance reform along these same lines.

Two themes run through the governance reform debate. The dominant one is changing the balance between lay and professional control by giving more power to parents or community members. The second theme is altering the balance between centralized and decentralized units of control. The decentralization thrust is closely

aligned with the school-site theme described above. The governance restructuring proposals that spark controversy, however, are those that emphasize giving increased power to lay citizens.

4. Marketing Education: Choice and Its Consequences

Some discussions of restructuring emphasize changing how schools operate rather than who controls their operations. These discussions focus on mechanisms of control and seek to reform education by changing the character or revision of the schools. Of the two target mechanisms for school restructuring, enhanced parental and student choice represent the most visible and the most controversial. Endorsed by the Bush Administration, adopted as state policy in Minnesota and enacted into Scottish Law more than a decade ago, the most dramatic form of choice expansion is through open enrollment of students in the schools of their choice. Advocates of this kind of choice are convinced that educational quality would be improved if schools had to compete for enrollment (and thus for financial support which follows students to the school). A recent book on the role of choice in school reform argues that, "Choice is the only reform having the capacity to address the basic causes of American educational problems" (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 218).

More widely practiced, but less often seen as fundamental restructuring of the educational system, is the magnet-school strategy of giving school clients a choice of the type of school program they wish, rather than merely a choice among schools offering, with various degrees of effectiveness, nominally similar programs. In urging the adoption of the open enrollment approach, Chubb and Moe (1990, p.216) argue that, "Alternative schools or magnets offer only a modicum of choice." Desegregation strategists and advocates of specialized school services targeted on the needs of special groups of students are more sanguine about the magnet approach, however.

5. Reshaping Curriculum and Pedagogy

Restructuring the programmatic content and pedagogical methods of the school is one of the and most confused themes in the restructuring debate. While nearly everyone agrees that the overarching reason for restructured schools is to improve educational services and effectiveness, specific proposals for reorienting teaching techniques and curriculum content are so varied and so frequently advanced without linking them to the restructuring policy debate that it is difficult to sort out what kind of a school program or practice change would qualify as a real restructuring strategy. Reforms like the "accelerated schools" program or "outcome based education" could be reviewed here as appropriate strategies (see, e.s. Rowan, 1990). We chose to emphasize the curriculum and pedagogical concepts associated with Theodore Sizer's "Coalition of Essential Schools" in our interviews.

Ted Sizer, author of Horace's Compromise (Sizer, 1984), has attracted substantial national attention with the development of the Coalition of Essential

Schools. This restructuring effort focuses on changing the nature of the relationship between teacher and students, creating a reduced teacher case-load, and sharply increasing the density of student teacher interactions at the personal level. This approach to restructuring appears to many observers to be the primary focus of the California Middle School Taskforce's Caught in the Middle report. The thrust is to reduce fragmentation in the curriculum and in student teacher relationships by assigning a small team of teachers responsibility for broad educational development in a modest cohort of students over an extended period of time.

6. Redefining the School Service Mix

Some restructuring concerns focus on the mission of the school and lead to proposals for changing the basic services being provided. While many educators and some political leaders have come to lament the intrusion of social welfare, public health, family life and other non-academic concerns into school programs, some restructuring advocates urge embracing these needs and altering school programs to give them full and explicit attention. One of the most prominent of proposals for this kind of restructuring is associated with Stanford University's Michael Kirst who advocates that the schools become the lead institution in a system of "integrated children's services," linking education with juvenile justice, child welfare, parks and recreation, libraries, public health and the full range of other public agencies with responsibility for family and child support (Kirst, 1989; see especially chapter by Heath & McLaughlin).

The Sizer pedagogical restructuring proposal and integrated childrens' services were selected for inquiry, along with the other themes described above, in order to ascertain how local school district executives evaluate alternative approaches to changing the core mission and strategies of school operations.

To reiterate a point made at the outset of this all too brief review of the alternative meanings of restructuring found in the literature, the themes we have distinguished are in no sense mutually exclusive. Quite often a restructuring proposal will use elements from several themes at once. Our intention in separating them is to enable local school executives to focus their attention on the alternatives and tell us which they find to be promising and desirable and which they fear would bring as much harm as good.

Eliciting Superintendent Views

Having identified the major themes of restructuring in the scholarly and professional literature, we sought to determine how local school district administrators think about the importance and value of alternative proposals for reform. The opportunity to discuss the issue with school superintendents was provided by the California Educational Research Cooperative (CERC), a collaborative organization of twenty-two school districts, two county offices of education and the

School of Education at the University of California, Riverside. During the spring of 1990, the Cooperative's Research Planning Council decided to place school restructuring on the list of six core research projects. They asked the CERC staff to review the literature on the subject and then work with member districts to document the effectiveness of various restructuring activities. In an effort to bring that research project into focus, we conducted loosely structured interviews with the superintendents of the member school districts.

The Superintendent Sample

The plan was to interview the superintendents of all twenty-two districts and both county offices, together with any key executive staff members they might wish to include in the discussion. Response was positive to the request for interview time -- respondents were generous with their time and more than happy to cooperate with the clarification of the research project which they had commissioned. In three cases, the superintendents were not actually interviewed. In one district the superintendent had just left the district to take a new job, so we interviewed the assistant superintendent for educational services in his stead. Scheduling conflicts made it impossible to interview a second superintendent, and one county office was represented by the assistant superintendent for educational services who had been the active liaison between the county office and the CERC Research Planning Council. In a fourth district, a search for a new superintendent was underway and we interviewed the senior administrator who had been appointed acting superintendent.

Eight superintendents or designees accepted the invitation to have other senior staff members join in the interview. Seven chose to invite one other person, one invited two other staff members to the interview. In total, then, thirty individuals were interviewed in twenty-one separate interviews. Interviews lasted from just about an hour to nearly three hours (including lunch in several cases).

The Interview Strategy

The interviews were loosely structured around three broad questions and concluded with a request for advice about how the California Educational Research Cooperative staff could best proceed with a study of school restructuring. The first question asked for a direct report about personal and district conceptions of restructuring. The second core question, which occupied the bulk of the interview time, asked for assessments of eight specific restructuring ideas found in the literature, and the third core question asked for each respondent's opinions about what was motivating interest in restructuring at the present time (text for the questions is presented below, in conjunction with findings from the data).

While the three core questions were always asked in the specified order, the individual topics covered in question two were covered in a variety of ways. The interviews were kept as conversational as possible, and numerous follow-up questions

were asked to clarify thinking and attitudes. In a few cases, time available for the interview expired before one or two of the eight subjects to be covered under question two were discussed, leaving a few holes in the data set regarding those issues. More frequently, respondents were much more interested in and knowledgeable about a limited number of alternatives and provided much clearer and more detailed evaluations of those with which they were most familiar.

Data Analysis Techniques

Two researchers participated in each interview. We had originally intended to audio tape record the interviews. That strategy was tried in with one superintendent, however, and was found to substantially interfere with the desired informality and openness of the discussion. As a result, we wrote copious notes during the interviews, and then typed these notes into a single long word-processing document. Quotations taken from those notes are not, of course, verbatim transcriptions of the superintendent responses during the interviews. Key words and phrases were preserved carefully, however. In order to simplify data presentation, and bring the reader closer to the interview setting, the notes are reproduced in this paper as if they were literal quotations. It should be remembered, however, that no quotations can be directly attributed to a particular superintendent (or other executive staff member).

Computer Based Content Analysis

Notes taken from the interviews produced an electronic file of approximately a quarter of a million characters. This file was content analyzed utilizing a specialized qualitative data analysis program written in the FRED programming language supported by Ashton-Tate's Framework III integrated software program for the personal computer.[2]

This qualitative data analysis program was used to collate responses to all of the key questions, and to cross reference concepts used in response to a particular question with other references to the same or similar concepts in answers to other interview questions. A total of eighteen coded and reorganized transcripts were

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[2]Details of the program are available from the senior author of this paper (Mitchell, 1991; the program is called "ethnograph" and works under Framework III control on any IBM compatible micro-computer). Briefly, the program tags and codes portions of the transcript text and then assembles text units with the same code label into to re-ordered transcripts, printing responses from all interviewees on any given subject or concept into a common printed document for direct comparison.

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prepared.[3] Examination of these reorganized transcript segments formed the basis of the findings reported in the next section.

Findings from the Data

The Meaning of Restructuring

The first question asked in each interview was:

> **Could you tell us about what restructuring means to you and to your district? What, if any, restructuring activities have you advocated, and which have been acted upon in your district?**

A first reaction to the responses of superintendents to this question is to agree with the superintendent who said,

> Restructuring is multifaceted. It has several components and there is no common definition.

Or, possibly to share the cynicism of the superintendent who says,

> In this district, restructuring is a "buzzword" attached to the "old" process. It's the same old package with new wrapping.

On closer examination, however, responses to this initial question fall into three broad clusters. The first emphasizes some form of devolution or decentralization of power and authority to school sites or classroom teachers. The second emphasizes participation or involvement in decision making without attendant shifts in formal authority. And the third emphasizes the goal of improved school effectiveness without specifying what sort of authority or organizational change is involved.

The largest group of responses, representing more than 40 percent of the interviewees, focused on some form of decentralization of authority in the form of school-based management and/or empowerment of site level staff or parents. Typical examples define restructuring as:

> Changing the governance structure so those implementing decisions have the major part in making them.

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[3] One was produced for each of the eight alternative approaches to restructuring, one for the personal and district meanings offered in response to the interview's opening question, one for responses to the summary question on the problem to which restructuring is addressed. The remaining eight coded transcripts examined key concepts frequently used to discuss restructuring issues. They were: accountability, authority, decentralization, instruction, participation, performance, school effectiveness, and trust.

> the desire of teachers to be a more meaningful part of decision making and a concern about top-down decision making in concert with a flattening of the organizational structure.
>
> Whomever you talk to -- parents, teachers, principals -- they become involved in the decision making process. Teachers are getting part of the decision making process. A manager runs the school and teacher committees can hire and fire. Teachers want to be involved in decisions. Administrators want authority at the site level. Districts want more authority. School boards want their power back.
>
> My perception of restructuring is that it is another form of decentralization. You face some critical questions -- what decisions should be decentralized?

When presenting this view, superintendents disagree quite sharply over whether the decentralizing, school-based management approach is either new or likely to produce useful results. On the negative side, typical evaluation comments include,

> It's reshuffling. In the pure sense, it should be getting at the root of education and change things, get down to teaching and learning, but we've been changing and reshuffling -- grade level configuration, curriculum and staff development, etc.

The second dimension in overall meaning -- restructuring as increased participation or involvement without necessarily changing formal organizational arrangements -- is reflected in such remarks as:

> Restructuring is participatory management. When I came into this district, I decentralized by authorizing principals. They began dealing with matters in their own schools and there was minimal district office involvement.
>
> It means involving people in developing the rules who will be actively playing the game.

About a quarter of the superintendents articulated some version of this definition. Apart from some who view this as merely good management which does not seriously respond to major problems facing school organizations, this view is not controversial. No one held the view that involvement and participation are bad ideas. What is recognized, however, is that there are two quite different reasons for moving in this direction. Some superintendents see participation and involvement as ways of improving the climate and trust levels in the school -- those who participate are expected to have "buy-in" or "ownership" of the resulting decisions. Another sub-group

of the superintendents see participation and involvement as mechanisms for conflict management. For them, conflict is not expected to be eliminated or significantly reduced through involvement. As a result, these superintendents approach involvement cautiously, sensing that it will complicate decision making and create problems of accountability for implementation of decisions which are not as clear or as easily monitored as the traditionally more centralized administrative decisions.

The third theme in the superintendent definitions of restructuring focuses on goals -- changes needed to improve school performance -- without giving much attention to questions of what specific changes are under consideration. This view is partly the result of seeing restructuring as **the** school reform thrust of the 1990's. For example, when a superintendent says,

> Restructuring is finding a more effective way to do what needs to be done. In education, that means asking how we can more effectively accomplish our mission.

restructuring is not distinguished from assessment reforms, new program developments, or other approaches to improved school effectiveness. Remarks that focused on this approach were offered by more than a quarter of the respondents. They included such remarks as,

> The restructuring we have done is packaging the organization in a different way -- the program and the goals.

In addition to the three broad themes -- devolution of authority, participation in decisions, and generalized performance improvement -- there were three unique conceptions of restructuring that deserve mention. They include, first,

> Restructuring is staff development -- instructional delivery types of change -- it is not really site-based.

Second,

> Another dimension is the coordination of services to deliver services to the student and the community. . . .Also the notion of choice and open enrollment where the principals and the staff of the school design a program and parents choose whether or not to send their children.

And third,

> Restructuring is a collective bargaining issue. It has a political overlay.

These three views represent challenging directions not typical of initial responses to the question, "What is restructuring?" Each was articulated by an assistant superintendent or director level staff member, and may reflect either a narrowness of perspective or simply the freedom to think divergent thoughts on the subject. The fact that some of these unique orientations were raised in response to the initially open-ended question about the meaning of restructuring, gave us some confidence that pursuing the eight specific approaches highlighted in the next eight interview questions would provide insightful clarification of issues.

The Eight Alternative Approaches

Within the framework of their overall conceptions of school restructuring, the superintendents discussed the eight specific restructuring options covered in second part of the interview. This part of the interview began by saying to the superintendents:

> **We would like to get your candid appraisal of a number of different approaches to restructuring found in the professional and scholarly literature on this topic. Would you discuss your reaction to each of the following themes:**

School-Based or Participatory Management

The first specific theme was introduced by saying:

> **Shifting management responsibility and authority to the school site and/or increasing participation in management decision making has been a major theme in restructuring efforts in places like Miami/Dade County and Los Angeles, California. How do you assess this approach to restructuring?**

Since it is a widely recognized strategy, school-based management was easily discussed. In a number of cases, however, the issue could not be addressed in a completely fresh way because the interviewees had already discussed a number of aspects of the devolution of authority and/or involvement of site-level staff and client groups in administration and management of the schools. Nevertheless, the question elicited detailed information about both the structures of superintendent thought and the strategies of action they consider appropriate in this area.

Three superintendents reported that high profile intense efforts to install and operationalize some form of school site management were currently under way at the time of the interviews. One of these superintendents reported that,

> There is lots of growth among the staff. They don't actually see the changes being made as a matter of restructuring, but consider this

> to be the normal process of management. The staff does a self-study (which solidifies them into a cohesive group) -- they plan, and they undertake a program quality review. . . .They review the [plan] document to see how it fits the strategic plan. . . .Each site has 7 or 8 people representing curriculum areas, facilitators, management team members. Teachers are paid at substitute rates during the summer. We meet monthly with the teachers union, classified employees, parents, the principal. . .

Other details provided make it clear that this is a serious effort to broaden participation and to insure that each school site in this small district has its own strategic management plan.

The breadth of involvement by teachers and other non- administrative staff in this plan is contrasted with that of a second superintendent who reported,

> Changing the governance structure so that those implementing the decisions have a major part in making them. The major problem is accountability. The school process isn't clear. We have to decide what to measure and how to do it at the school. Once there is a common understanding of what the school's responsibility for measurement is, a plan will be developed based on that data and linked to school effectiveness criteria. A deficit model plan will be made up to drive what goes on in the school. There will be a council of principals who will meet in groups of six. Each group will have a lead principal that will be a cabinet member. . . .The central office will have no line authority; principals will drive the Instructional Division, so the rest of the divisions become service oriented.

Although this plan is focused almost entirely on restructuring the links between principals and the central office, it represents a major, high profile, commitment to using the concept of restructuring to define and develop executive management influence over the district.

The third superintendent reporting a major site-management oriented restructuring in progress focused most strongly on teacher involvement in the process. This superintendent reported,

> Restructuring involves a degree of empowerment. It is a form and degree of decentralization in order to empower. Site-based management can be either at the school site or out of the superintendent's office. We are restructuring to that end. We are empowering sites, teacher groups, the union, the classroom. We are working hard to involve both the rank and file and the leadership of the union as part of the empowerment.

There was strong agreement with our summary that pedagogy is the motive for reform, while site-based management is the process of getting there. For this superintendent, changes in the principal's role are the consequence of changing teacher roles, not the primary consideration. Three other superintendents gave a similar emphasis to general empowerment rather than devolution of power to principals, but none reported substantial programs currently under development.

While these superintendents spoke enthusiastically about their current site-based management approaches to restructuring, others were less sure that this approach is either new or particularly important. One superintendent sees site-based management as the central element in restructuring, but reports that,

> It is unavoidable in some form. It will come to all of us. . . .It is not something [my district] is rushing to do. [In fact, though] site-based management is restricted to site councils, there is no rush on anyone's part to do anything else. Academic accountability is inadequate.

The point of resistance is the loss of accountability implied in this approach. Half the superintendents who discussed site-based management as a serious reform effort expressed some level of concern about whether it could be kept under suitable control. Control strategies were about evenly divided between those who wanted to find "accountability" mechanisms that would hold the newly empowered staff members "feet to the fire" of responsibility for their decisions, and those who wanted to limit the range of decisions which would be referred to the site-based management team. Two superintendents discussed the decision limitation strategy in very specific terms. One said,

> We need to say what can be centralized and what can be decentralized in seven categories: policy development, organizational effectiveness, administrative support, team building, research and development, organizational design, and public affairs.

The other reported on research into the topic and said,

> Decisions under consideration for decentralization are in 35 areas, in seven categories. We need to train people for shared decision making. We need to identify principal decisions and place them in the categories. The critical factor is whether teachers feel they have influenced the decisions being made.

Six superintendents emphasized the problem of accountability. Typical was a superintendent's summary conclusion that,

> I believe in site-based management, within district control, where sites are held responsible for results. . . .There should be district controls on the site, and not too much autonomy.

Teacher Empowerment

The second restructuring strategy was introduced by saying:

> **Teacher empowerment -- enhancing teacher control over teaching tasks and work responsibilities -- has been encouraged by a number of restructuring advocates, notably AFT president Albert Shanker. How do you assess this approach?**

With notable exceptions, teacher empowerment is not seen as a promising approach to restructuring by the superintendents in this sample. Fully half of those interviewed offered explicitly negative appraisals of this strategy. Another quarter of the respondents were equivocal. Only six of the interviewees endorsed the concept.

A typical negative appraisal went as follows,

> It has a negative connotation because of events in Los Angeles. I don't like the term power because it gives the connotation that you can do anything you want. Empowerment tells teachers that they have control over anything they want. But teachers have control in the classroom while management should have control over the direction of the district. I believe in the group input process and in teacher communication, but someone needs to have the final say and accountability for the consequences. There is no accountability for teachers now, no consequences for any irresponsibility they might show.

The six supportive superintendents, including the three currently pursuing school-based management programs, said things like,

> First, we empowered teachers and principals to get them to buy into working with the district. Now we are all able to look at money as a means to accomplish objectives [rather than a focal point for conflict].

> Teacher empowerment is a good idea. Teachers are best equipped to make decisions in a focused way.

> To me, restructuring is both a conglomeration and a synthesis of effective schools, empowerment and outcome based education. It is a degree of empowerment through decentralization. . . .the working

> committee is not called the "empowerment" or "restructuring" committee because those terms have negative connotations. The committee named itself the "Focus for the 90's." We gave ownership to the committee.

Mixed feelings, like the following, were shared by a significant group,

> As far as empowerment, I think that there are a body of decisions best made by teachers, and in other arenas decisions are best made by someone else.

A few of those most negative about empowerment as a reform strategy indicate that they are not opposed to the idea, but that teachers already have as much power as they can usefully handle. As one put it,

> Most of the raw power is already in the classroom. The teacher is empowered -- what they do in the classroom is powerful, whether it is good, bad or indifferent.

Teacher Professionalization

The teacher professionalism theme was introduced with:

> **As distinguished from empowerment, some advocates emphasize teacher professionalism as the goal of restructuring. Among others, the Carnegie Task Force has emphasized this approach. How do you assess this approach?**

This theme was the most difficult concept for the superintendents to evaluate clearly. Eight of the respondents did not comment, or gave responses too sparse or vague to classify. The remaining 22 clearly had substantial trouble formulating an adequate working definition of professionalism, and often reported that the concept was lacking in shared meaning among educators. Typical remarks included,

> I think it is a matter of understanding what the word professionalism means in the field. In some organizations it is belonging to the union. In others it means keeping parents informed or watching how you dress. In others, it means behaving well with the administration. We must listen to that definition and understand it.

There were some serious and provocative efforts at defining the term, as when one superintendent said,

> For me it takes several variations. The most important deals with how the individual communicates information to the clients of the organization. Other variables include the value of comportment, the ability to handle stress, the ability to handle parents.

Among the interviewees that were able to formulate reasonably clear views on the subject, half offered various reasons why they did not expect professionalism among teachers. Some depreciated the members of the occupation with such remarks as,

> There is a fear among teachers. . .they don't want teachers to evaluate each other. They prefer mediocrity and equality.

> The big problem with restructuring is that a large number of teachers are in the profession because it's attractive in terms of holidays, etc. They're not willing to invest the time and effort needed for professionals.

More often, however, respondents identified specific reasons why professionalism was unlikely to succeed in the schools. Some saw unionism as contradicting professional status for teachers. For example,

> It may be because of the union. Principals and teachers may feel that they have to support the union. Those feelings come into play even when we are talking about the [California] Mentor Teacher Program. They can't be professional as long as they have a strong union.

Inadequate accountability or evaluation systems for teachers were seen by some superintendents as a key impediment to professionalism. One superintendent sees the issue as one of salary levels,

> No doubt the workforce needs to be more professional and have higher requirements for credentialing. . . .Higher salaries will. . .assure that the job will be equally respected as doctors and lawyers. The bottom line is salary.

Among superintendents who are optimistic about professionalism, two lines of thought can be seen. The largest group, about a quarter of the superintendents, emphasize induction or repopulation strategies to bring new people into the workforce and to give them solid basis for defining themselves as professionals. A somewhat smaller group emphasizes changing the attitudes and orientations of current teachers. The first group is represented in such remarks as,

> We need to support the idea that teaching is a marvelous career, and raise our standards. I'm disappointed in teacher education -- they don't help the people who come in. They just send them out.

The latter group represents the most optimistic and visionary. They tend, however, to feel that the word professional is a bit overblown for their vision of a good working relationship. They are represented in such remarks as,

> Professionalism is the wrong word, but I don't know what the right word is. The car industry has gotten workers to become committed to building better cars. And the worker team is accepting accountability for doing a better job. That is what is lacking in our profession -- commitment and accountability to what is coming out instead of putting the blame on the factory, or on the kids and their families.

Individual superintendents commented on various mechanisms for encouraging professionalism among teachers, but there was not enough consistency in their comments to form a clear picture of any particular strategy. In addition to the use of career ladders and mentor teacher programs, one or more superintendents offered evaluations of the California New Teacher Project, the professional development school approach, national credentialing, and reform of teacher education programs.

Labor Relations Restructuring

Assessment of the need for restructuring the school's labor relations system was introduced by saying:

> **Some restructuring or reform advocates urge a fundamental overhaul of the labor relations system. California state superintendent Bill Honig made a brief foray into this area recently. How do you assess this approach?**

Responses can be distinguished along two dimensions. The first is the degree of urgency with which the superintendents feel that change in this arena is needed. Some superintendents have clearly made their peace with the prevailing form of labor relations, others feel that the corrosive, adversarial character of the current system is a major, possibly the most important, impediment to good school performance. The second dimension in the data on this issue distinguishes those superintendents for whom labor relations is a fundamental dimension of school operations from those who see labor relations as a merely instrumental activity -- one whose quality and character hinges on other dimensions of school culture and management. Those who view labor relations as instrumental have, naturally, a much narrower range of feelings about how critical it might be to restructure this aspect of the educational system.

A typically moderate approach was expressed by the superintendent who said,

> Yes, we need to restructure that area, but we need to restructure attitudes first. It needs to come back to the willingness to work for the best of the population that we are working for.

A harsher judgment is found in remarks like the following,

> We should be defined as educators -- not as management, administrators and teachers. Many teachers are not achievers, so they look for and tolerate mediocrity. They are not doing their job. It's a power game instead of a matter of getting something done. It's now a win/lose situation and we need to educate people to help them see it differently.
>
> The union movement is misguided because it is not guided by local but by regional and state issues which don't look at the impact at the local level. Collective bargaining has "fogged up the water."

The aim of labor relations reform was often put in terms like the following,

> We need a change to a non-adversarial, collaborative model. We need better ways of communicating at the school site. Principals and staffs should routinely discuss problems and create solutions. Someone should be assigned to work on the solution and a timeline established. The adversarial relationship that has developed interferes.

A typical "work-around-the-problem" attitude is embodied in the following remark,

> We deal with teachers, their needs and functions, not the union. The union is dealing in self-interest.

Dissatisfied resignation that the problem is intractable is expressed in statements like,

> We have had binding arbitration, a union shop, a strong union, even a strike. We have contract language that is as pro-union as any contract that you will find. We live within it. I don't advocate that we do away with that, but I would like to modify it.

Pedagogical Restructuring

Restructuring school curricula and pedagogy was introduced by saying:

Reorganization of the curriculum and of the relationship between teachers and students has been seen as the key issue by some restructuring advocates. Ted Sizer's approach utilized by the Coalition of Essential Schools illustrates this focus. Other examples include Outcome Based Education, Accelerated Schools, and other comprehensive school program reforms. How do you assess this approach?

While superintendents generally responded with enthusiasm for the idea of pedagogical restructuring, they frequently felt that reform activity in this area is diffuse, ongoing and not generally labeled as restructuring. The best statement of this view in captured in the following response,

> I think that [pedagogical restructuring] is what is behind the California "Caught in the Middle" report. We are implementing it in the middle schools -- teachers follow students through all grades 6, 7 and 8 in a counseling role. It is essential, but we don't attach the term restructuring to the middle school.

Sometimes this was accompanied by a negative view of this approach to restructuring, as when superintendents said,

> I think he [Ted Sizer] is dealing with finding a new word to indicate that he is doing new things. . . .I fear that we are doing lots of word exchanges.
>
> It is a wonderful idea, we have tried those things. What we need is to see why they failed before and were abandoned. For example, modular scheduling resulted in mass confusion.
>
> I'm concerned that this kind of restructuring deals only with private schools. There is a vast difference between private and public schools. . . .The theory is okay, but the delivery system is not likely to work in public schools.

Half the superintendents interviewed linked this discussion, in approving tones, to the California middle school reforms that have followed publication of the "Caught in the Middle" report. They made remarks like,

> Not a bad idea. It is embedded in the middle school concept, but would be more difficult to implement in elementary schools.
>
> That's a good philosophy, the middle school movement shows this -- teams of teachers with students.

Two superintendents pointed to the educational programs in their continuation high schools as examples of the sort of curricular restructuring that may be needed. They said,

> We have a good example of that here in our continuation high school. There are 100 kids now. Graduations are different. There is more participation. We need to transfer the closeness of this smaller campus to our large high schools and structure them so each teacher is responsible for a specific group of students.
>
> The reorganization of teaching implied in Ted Sizer's ideas assumes that there is stability of staff and students. This is not generally the case. We do, however, have some similar ideas in our continuation school where we use competency based mastery.

Some superintendents knew of no successful implementations, but were quite enthusiastic about the concept of pedagogical and curricular restructuring. One said,

> This kind of restructuring gets at the core of teaching and learning, but I know of no one that is doing it.

Others said,

> It is something to consider, but we haven't yet.
>
> We've begun talking about it. It is a possible direction to move in. I see value in it.

Where there was resistance to the idea of moving in this direction, two basic reasons were given. Some superintendents pointed to high student and staff transiency and insisted that any reform that presumed the development of intensive student- teacher relationships was doomed to failure. The other criticism is that it will never come to pass because the process of change is so fragile that any reform which spreads out responsibility and removes program guidelines and administrative oversight is likely to lead to chaos and diffusion of effort rather than improved performance.

Governance Reform

Governance reform strategies were queried by asking:

> **For some the primary focus of restructuring should be on the governance system -- enhancing the control of parents or lay boards. The Chicago public schools recently enacted a system of lay councils for each school, with authority over programs and staff employment. How do you assess this approach?**

Reactions to the prospect of stronger lay control through a restructuring of school governance -- especially lay control at the school site level -- were generally, but not entirely, negative. Superintendent views can be arrayed along a single spectrum. At one end are those who view proposals like the Chicago plan as a bad idea, one that threatens the quality of public education by subjugating professional judgement to the whimsical or biased judgments of uninformed lay boards. At the other end of the spectrum are a few superintendents who view the reform as appropriate, maybe even desirable, for larger urban school districts. One superintendent took a generally positive view of the governance reform approach, concluding the generally positive appraisal with,

> I have a different perspective, due to different experiences. The kids and their parents are our clients. We need to ask what outcomes they want. In my district, I am calling 10% of the parents in the district and asking them what they think the strengths and weaknesses of the district are and asking them to share their profile of the ideal student. I'm trying to listen in terms of outcomes and design programs to achieve them.

Such sentiments fall short of the Chicago model of school site councils with personnel and budget authority, but they do accept in principle the desirability of lay dominance over program goals and educational design.

The most negative appraisal of governance reform came from a superintendent who said,

> I don't believe the assumption that kids are better educated and have better opportunities to learn when educational decisions are made by uninformed lay people -- it boggles my mind! What is the proof? Why isn't the public anxious to place education into the hands of those who are trained to do the job? Why weaken it by being responsive to every special interest group?

The reasons for rejecting lay control are varied. Some focus on the inherent difficulties of getting strong, unbiased lay leaders,

> I'm uncomfortable with the transiency of those who would serve on lay councils. You get politics focused on control rather than input to decisions.

> A major stumbling block to successful education is the school board model where we have to cajole lay people into doing what the professionals think is correct.

More frequently, the superintendents see the issue as a direct conflict between professional and lay judgments,

> I am concerned with the proliferation of boards of education running schools -- lay people being in charge of professional people and organizations. There is no training for being a board member, but they can control the system without the knowledge. Most have good intentions, but many become board members with a personal agenda.

Still others take a more analytical view and argue that proliferation of lay boards will fragment school programs or that school level educators need "buffering levels" between them and direct political pressure from parents and communities.

Choice or Marketing Educational Services

The issue of expanded educational choice was introduced with:

> **Increasing choice for parents and students in the primary focus of some restructuring efforts. Two different approaches are taken. One emphasizes open enrollment and assumes that the issue is program quality (Minnesota has enacted this open enrollment approach into law). The other emphasizes magnet schools and assumes that the issue is differentiation of program content (San Bernardino and Richmond California have used this approach). How do you assess this approach to restructuring?**

This question elicited the most divergent assessments from the superintendents. One called expansion of choice a "bad idea" and said that it would,

> Reinforce Coleman's findings, encourage flight from schools based on socio-economic status and would thus hurt communities and children.

Another superintendent insisted that,

> The choice issue is a "copout." If we did a better job of lining up with colleges, universities and businesses we could offer a range of services giving equity to all. Choice implies that some things are not good. . . .Choice is a pendulum issue assuming a negative as opposed to a change model.

By contrast, one superintendent said,

> I've seen it work and work well. . .I'm inclined toward open enrollment. . . .Open enrollment improves education in general.

This superintendent was not uncritical in his approval, he noted that transferring students are too often motivated solely by athletics or extra-curricular activity interests rather than improved educational quality. Thus, he urges that open enrollment be combined with a rule that, "they can't compete for 1 year." As a result, "transfers will go down", but when they occur they will help pressure the schools for educational improvement.

The positive view was expressed succinctly by the superintendent who said choice is a,

> critical concept. If you move to empower people you move to choice.

Two factors shape the superintendents divergent assessments of expanded family choice reforms. The first is the question of whether choice is primarily intended to enhance involvement in and support for the school program or is a way of encouraging specialization of school programs. One superintendent suggests that, "choice doesn't produce competition, but client satisfaction, reducing the noise of dissatisfaction." This superintendent is supported by one who said,

> the ability to choose does not always involve specialization, it makes parents feel involved in the decision making process.

A third superintendent argues explicitly that specialization is not desired by most parents,

> At the elementary school level, everybody wants the same thing.

In contrast with these views, some superintendents are sure that,

> We need to offer more specialization and diversify programs. Choice and specialization are components of each other.

This view is given detail by one superintendent who responded by describing magnet schools already developed, and indicated that parental choice among schools is being reinforced by creating a parent advisory structure that "has a say" in budgetary decision making (related to matters such as field trips and the acquisition of computer hardware and software). Superintendents who see the virtues of program specialization generally emphasize magnet school development rather than an open enrollment approach to expanding parental choice.

Resistance to choice has a number of roots. Some superintendents see expanded choice as expensive and do not see choice advocates as willing to pay the additional costs of program duplication or student transportation. Several insist that, "there can't be schools of choice without transportation" and that, "overall it means that people who can afford transportation will have choice." Another says,

> I think it's a "cheap reform." It puts people's feet closer to the fire without providing the resources to do the job.

Others resist the concept on principle. After saying that magnet schools are very expensive, one superintendent says,

> I believe in a comprehensive system. With some exceptions, such as vocational education, it is better to have a comprehensive approach so that everyone will work with all sorts of kids.

Similar sentiments were offered by a superintendent who said,

> I have a feeling that when you create schools of choice you are saying that other schools are lesser in some way. Every school should offer absolute excellence and present the best program for everyone. . . .It is a republican issue to ultimately provide funding for private schools.

Integrated Child Service Delivery

The final reform theme presented for evaluation -- integrated child services -- was introduced with:

> **Another approach to restructuring emphasizes the need for integrating the full range of children's services (juvenile justice, public health, parks and recreation, social welfare, etc.) and proposes that the school serve as a coordinating agency for the integrated service delivery. This approach is often associated with the work of Michael Kirst at Stanford University. How do you assess this approach?**

Responses to this question were generally positive, with about two-thirds of the superintendents endorsing this approach. Four of the superintendents indicated that they are taking concrete steps to establish systems of service coordination, although none have persuaded other child service agencies to use the school as a center of service delivery. The most fully developed approach is found in one of the county offices which has succeeded in establishing a Children's Network composed of agency department heads and policy makers who meet regularly to identify service delivery problems and work on response strategies.

Two of the most active districts reported that,

> The importance of this issue is illustrated by the community action planning workshop we had. We stayed for three and a half days --

> 48 community people. It was a networking of agencies for the good of kids. We created an action plan.

and,

> It is easier to integrate services in small communities. We have after school day care staffed by school aides. We use the counseling center for drug counseling. There are classes at [a nearby community college]. The sheriff's department helps with out of home child abuse and child protective services. Juvenile justice is not as positive, they won't prosecute absentees. Overall, there is some integration of services. We give lists of resources to counselors and principals.

Another group of superintendents liked the idea, even though they are not presently involved in specific activities. A typical comment was,

> An excellent idea. From our own experiences of working in cooperative efforts, it depends on the leadership of the agencies. I'm in favor of the school being the leader.

Some superintendents like the idea, but are fearful that there will be no financial resources or decision making authority allocated to support school efforts. Thus, the end result may be expanded responsibility with no expansion in capacity for service delivery. One superintendent put the fiscal issue directly,

> As long as they bring their money, I agree theoretically. Children's services should be organized around the nucleus of where the kids are. In reality, however, the fiscal part won't work.

Another superintendent echoed the sentiments with,

> If you look at what the governor vetoed in the way of community services, we are going to have lots of problems. I think it is the right idea, but we need the resources to carry it out.

A deeper reservation was expressed by one assistant superintendent who fears that coordination without authority will only waste time and effort,

> There is the issue of coordination versus shifting responsibilities. Coordination, without authority, would bog down the schools, while shifting responsibilities would put both the services and the funds in the schools.

While several superintendents thought the integrated service idea might distract schools from their central mission, only two thought there might be something wrong with the concept itself. One put it mildly, saying,

> I'm concerned that there would be too much structure in the child's life -- children could become institutionalized instead of supported.

The other put it more starkly,

> I find the prospect scary. The state realizes there are large numbers of neglected children and is moving in to take control of the children away from the parents. While it could be coordinated, it could turn out bringing "1984" into reality.

What is the Problem Being Addressed?

The final question in the interview asked the superintendents to step back from the discussion of specific approaches to restructuring. They were asked:

> **Perhaps another way to look at the issue of restructuring is to turn the question around and ask, "If restructuring is the answer, what is the problem it is intended to resolve?" How would you respond to this question?**

Three distinctive viewpoints are found in the responses to this question. About a quarter of the superintendents focus on the internal dynamics of public education. They see the problem as lack of suitable mechanisms for identifying or responding to problems within the schools. Typical examples of this view are found in such remarks as,

> The attitudinal factor [among staff] is important. We need to build trust and confidence within that school that everyone is trying to do what's best for the kids.

> I believe we know about change and to make it, just not how to institutionalize it. People need to learn how to work in groups, how to work with people. The issues are mainly how to work in groups and change behaviors.

The other two perspectives are more prevalent and focus on the school's environment. The dominant view emphasizes that school performance is inadequate and that ways need to be found to improve it. The second most prevalent view is that the problem is more a lack of public confidence, than a lack of actual performance in the schools. The performance problem view is expressed in such remarks as,

> The primary reason is what is happening to the population. We are desperate to find a methodology to deal with the children we have been receiving from a rapidly changing population.
>
> Student performance. We need to improve it.
>
> We are in a different age, the information age. There is a knowledge explosion. We can't get enough knowledge across to children with the way schools are structured today. . . .the basic structures must make changes.
>
> We're about educating youngsters. Are we doing the best job we can? I think not.
>
> A lack of results -- kids aren't performing well on tests or other assessments.

The loss of public confidence view is captured in such statements as,

> We need to change the public's perception that we are doing a bad job and that we are not satisfying the needs of high risk kids.
>
> There is a problem in education that people expect more out of the educational system than it is capable of giving. . . .The problem is with parents and the home, not students or teachers. The schools are dealing with symptoms.
>
> The problem is the credibility of public education. People don't see and celebrate the good things in education. The good things are not publicized like the bad.

Overarching Themes

Sorting out the reasons why superintendents and other senior executives in local school districts hold widely divergent conceptions of the nature and potential value of various school restructuring approaches is not easy. No doubt, important differences in viewpoint result from personal experiences and background factors that could not be identified by the superintendents themselves, much less by researchers who interview and observe them for brief periods. Nevertheless, a few important factors contributing to the thinking of those we interviewed can be identified. These factors occurred at three different conceptual levels in the analysis of our data. The first is the global orientation of the school executives to analysis. Superintendent comments and concerns cut across institutional, organizational and operational aspects of school life.

Levels of Superintendent Thinking

When superintendents think institutionally about the issues of restructuring and reform they tend to conceptualize problems in cultural value terms. They think more about societal good and less about educational effectiveness. They see problems as a matter of cultural values and social norms rather than technical or programmatic weaknesses. They respond to restructuring as an opportunity to link schools to a broad system of social support and return the care and keeping of program designs and task execution to the professional staff. They still remember, or think they remember, a time when schools were "buffered" from politics to prevent parochial biases and special interests from deflecting educators from their sacred duty to enculturate the next generation of citizens, workers and family members.

Within our interview data, institutional or cultural levels of thinking led superintendents to develop vivid evaluative judgements about restructuring, frequently without a very clear set of ideas about strategy. They did not always agree that restructuring is a good idea. But they tended to think of it as either a great "crusade" to restore education to its proper institutional role as a source of community and individual development, or as an annoying, politicized and opportunistic distraction from the "real business" of the schools.

When superintendents think institutionally about their work, the language they use to describe how they do their work emphasizes symbolism and mobilization of support rather than precision and accountability for performance. Institutionally, school superintendents are political leaders with responsibility for inspiration, motivation and definition of broad goals. To fulfill their political leadership role, they need to use language which attracts supporters from a broad cross-section of the community. To do this, the meanings of terms like restructuring need to be kept open and dynamic--molded to attract and hold institutional support for the schools. The superintendents we interviewed recognize this role and, often intuitively, get to fulfill it. In doing so, they avoid defining terms too precisely and emphasize the evaluative use of language--building a sense of urgency or danger rather than clarifying program and policy specifications.

Closer to the action, when they feel a need to make more explicit judgements about how and when to restructure some feature of the schools, superintendents tend to think in organizational and managerial terms rather than in social and cultural ones. When thinking of themselves as executive leaders, responsible for defining the mission and work agenda of the schools, superintendents tend find broad cultural values slipping into the background. They begin to think strategically, looking at the practicality of a proposal at least as often as its ultimate worth. At this organizational/managerial level, superintendents will frequently say something like, "its a good idea, but. . .," "I support that philosophically, but. . .," or "I like that, but I have a concern about. . ." In each case, it is virtually certain that the superintendent in question is not putting his or her personal credibility or power behind the concept. At

the same time, once convinced that a proposal is organizationally sound, executives thinking in these terms will insist that specific proposals be developed and put on the management working agenda for the school. Of course, not all executives are equally skilled at seizing and holding the planning and decision making agenda for the organization, but when thinking at this level they are preparing themselves to exert influence over organizational goal setting and program planning.

There is a third layer of superintendent thought that lies beneath their strategic interest in organizational management. That is the operational or technical level. Here the central questions are: Will the ideas work? What effects will there be for staff and students? Superintendents are a bit ambivalent about thinking in these terms. On the one hand, they know that their technical understanding is limited to a relatively small segment of the issues and ideas with which the organization must deal. On the other hand, they recognize that they can be blind-sided by relying too much on other's judgments. Moreover, they often find personal satisfaction in coming to grips with specific programmatic issues. Moreover, superintendents feel that they must be seen as having a firm grip on the details of school technical operations in order to have their judgment about broader issues accepted and implemented.

For quite understandable reasons, superintendents tend to discuss their knowledge and experience with the technical and operational aspects of restructuring only when a suitable level of trust and confidence has been established in an interview setting. Once the analysis moves to technical assessment, superintendents tend to draw experienced subordinates into the conversation, and are delighted to hear how others evaluate competing proposals for action. When this happened, the interviews were most satisfying to the superintendents. Conversation flowed comfortably when we were willing to share resources or conceptual perspectives as well as to listen to their assessments of the technical and operational feasibility of specific issues. The interviews involving subordinates as well as the superintendent were most helpful at this point, because the interviewers could contribute to clarification and elicit information and judgment without being pressed to become "visiting experts."

Cutting across the institutional, organizational and operational levels of analysis and conversation that were played out in the interviews we found three key tensions that tended to shape each superintendent's overall pattern of thinking about the restructuring issue.

Tensions Cutting Across the Thinking Process

Superintendents tended to adopt relatively consistent positions in each of these three domains, positions which they held throughout the interviews.

Saliency vs Explicitness of the Issue

The first tension involves the prominence or saliency of the whole restructuring policy debate. All superintendents displayed relatively vivid positions on the questions of whether restructuring is conceptually important in their current job setting. Independent of whether they felt restructuring was an important issue, however, they also tended to hold a separate view on whether the label "restructuring" is, itself, an important part of the issue. A few superintendents (we might call them the "cynicals") expressed the view that the issue is "just another round" in the school improvement debate and that it is not important to use this label to describe its essential content. Another small group (let's call them the "believers") were polar opposites of this group. They believe that restructuring is vitally important, and that it is important to describe these reforms as school "restructuring." Though their approaches differed in significant detail, all were concerned with the devolution of power to school sites and expanding the work roles of principals and teachers.

A third group of superintendents, somewhat larger than either of the first two groups in our sample, gave strong support to the "idea" of restructuring, but were often loath to use the label for the changes they were seeking to support. This group (let's call them the "actives") believe that restructure and reform of school operations is crucial to the future success of public education, but they are not sure that good management needs to be called restructuring at all. One of the superintendents said early in the interview, "We don't do restructuring here, we just do good management. Sometimes that leads to structural change, but that's not why we do it."

Finally, there were a group of superintendents who felt that the label, restructuring, is a vitally important one, but who are not, themselves, involved supporting or implementing it. Almost all of the superintendents held this view on one or another of the specific restructuring program proposals we discussed. Some held this view (let's call it the "uncommitted") on virtually all issues discussed.

Performance Improvement vs Legitimacy of the Schools

A second tension which separated the superintendents into two nearly equal groups was the issue of whether they think restructuring is necessary to improve real school performance or to recover public confidence in the educational system. We are here conceptualizing these positions as mutually exclusive. If a superintendent views it as important to regain public confidence by improving real performance, we treated that as a belief that real performance improvement is essential. As described more fully in the findings section above, we found that nearly half the superintendents interviewed believe that the restructuring issue is upon them at this time because public confidence has been lost, not because school performance is objectively below legitimate expectations.

This tension between improving objective performance (which raises a whole complex of questions about how to measure and document that improvement), and re-establishing what Meyer and Rowan (1978) called the "logic of confidence" in public education leads to very different thinking about the nature and potential value of alternative approaches to school restructuring. Performance improvement can only be expected if restructuring changes the technical core of teaching and learning (either directly or through changed mechanisms for supporting it). By contrast, the logic of confidence could be re-established by reducing internal staff conflict, expanding involvement and "buy-in" by parents and the public, or other strategies that change perceptions without necessarily affecting the operational core.

Accountability vs Ownership

The third central tension cutting across superintendents thinking about school restructuring is their ambivalence about whether the central point of leverage for assuring success is the creation of "accountability" structures or the development of "ownership" structures for the school staff. Independent of the performance/confidence tension, about half the superintendents embrace the accountability theme while the other half give implicit endorsement to the idea that the central problem is staff motivation and ownership. Superintendents who emphasize accountability are fearful of the centrifugal force of uncontrolled decentralization. They anticipate fragmentation of effort and abandonment of responsibility if explicit accountability structures are not built into the foundation of any restructured system. The ownership oriented superintendents are much less confident that accountability will help. They seem to be saying that accountability is eviscerating motivation, making it impossible to get the kind of grass-roots sensitivity and effort needed to reach children and develop needed new programs.

Contextual Factors Influencing Superintendent Thinking

Finally, throughout the course of the interviews we gradually became aware of two contextual factors which tended to interact with strategic thinking processes to shape superintendent feeling and beliefs about restructuring. The first of these contextual factors has to do with "newness" to the superintendency, the second with what might be called the "mandate" for action emanating to the superintendent from staff and community groups.

Two Dimensions of "Newness"

One of the interviewees provided our first clue to how context shapes commitments to restructuring. This superintendent, one of the "actives," is committed to school improvement and reform, but describes his district as relatively conservative and tending to rest on a tradition of high performance. He judged it likely that the superintendents we found who were "out front" with the restructuring band wagon

were likely to be new to their jobs. It was he who said, we don't do restructuring, we do good management.

This remark led us to think carefully about the superintendents who were most explicit in their endorsements of various restructuring initiatives, and those who were most likely to treat this as just "one more round" in the school improvement process. Newness to the job, we discovered, has two components. Some superintendents are in their first superintendency, they are new to the position. Some were outsiders before being appointed to their current position, they are new to the district. With the exception of the county superintendent working on development of an integrated children's services reform effort, all of the superintendents who indicated that they are currently engaged in a major restructuring venture are new in both of these ways. The two superintendents declaring that restructuring is a highest priority concern are new in the second sense -- after serving superintendencies elsewhere, they are now in their first or second year as superintendents in CERC districts.

Global Work Orientations

Finally, superintendents differ in the context of support for their work. That is, they have differing "mandates" emanating from school boards, communities or staff groups. Some districts have been living through vividly contested labor relations problems, others are just making the transition from small rural communities to suburbanized developments. Some board members have been through intense political conflicts, including a successful recall election in one district and an unsuccessful one in another. Three districts have just undergone unification and are mounting secondary programs for the first time. Some districts have fiscal problems, others have very rapid population growth to cope with. All of these factors shape superintendent willingness to see restructuring as a critical issue. By and large, restructuring is more important in communities serving lower socio-economic status students, and in districts where building programs are pretty well in hand and overt political conflict at a modest level.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This paper has explored the responses of thirty superintendents and senior school district executives to questions about the meaning and relevance of school restructuring. Distinctive orientations toward the overall problems of school reform, and toward eight specific approaches to restructuring were analyzed. While exploratory work of this sort cannot be expected to lead to conclusions about the statistical distribution of various ideas, or about the reliability of the linkages discovered in the thinking of this group of senior school executives, it does lead to three important policy insights.

First, despite its popularity in the literature and in the education press, school restructuring is not a clearly focused program of reform. Restructuring concepts are

many, and thoughtful educators often hold contradictory judgments about the potential value of specific approaches. This situation has the virtue of being able to hold a broad base political coalition together to bring pressure to bear on school systems. It holds the danger that individual educators will become cynical about what is expected, or exhausted by the cross-pressures exerted by incompatible restructuring programs.

Second, because its role as a political "condensation symbol" (Cobb & Elder, 1972) is so crucial, policy makers need to be very careful in judging the success of their efforts to induce district restructuring. Some local districts will embrace the label while avoiding the substance, others will pursue the substance but, for reasons that make sense in the local context, eschew the label.

Third, most of the restructuring efforts being proposed and attempted are relatively remote from the "technical core" (Thompson, 1967) of teaching and learning. As a result, it is quite unlikely that they can, or should, produce immediate changes in student experiences and in learning outcomes. Time will be required for school staff and community leaders to internalize the restructured system and gain the skills necessary to facilitate its operation. But time is a scarce commodity in any political system, doubly so when symbolic considerations outweigh technical ones in the adoption of a policy. Local educators would be well advised to think carefully and invest wisely in the documentation of their restructuring activities. Central government officials will want evidence of impact, even though they do not have clear guidelines for action. The politics of evaluating restructured schools may be just as important to the long term success of this policy as has been the politics of raising restructuring to the top of the policy agenda.

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